



A Safe Harbor

In 1838 Frederick Douglass fled from slavery in Maryland and lived for a time in the second house from the corner, diagonally in front of you. He and his wife Anna stayed in the home of Nathan and Mary (known as Polly) Johnson. The Johnsons were well-known New Bedford business people. Nathan was an African American and Polly was of Wampanoag Indian and African descent.

Nathan Johnson and New Bedford gave Douglass example and opportunity to grow into one of the greatest abolitionists of his time. Douglass found New Bedford's people of color to be "educated to the point of fighting for their freedom, as well as speaking for it."



I shall ever be deeply grateful, both to Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Johnson, for the lively interest they were pleased to take in me, in this the hour of my extremest need. They not only gave myself and wife bread and shelter, but taught us how to begin to secure those benefits for ourselves.

Frederick Douglass, 1855

Born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, Douglass changed his name to Frederick Johnson on his escape from slavery. Because so many New Bedford people of color carried the name Johnson, Nathan Johnson suggested taking the name Douglass, after the Scottish lord in Sir Walter Scott's poem *The Lady of the Lake*.

Photo Courtesy Gregory French

The Johnson House, about 1890

Photo Courtesy Trustees New Bedford Free Public Library

Nathan and Polly Johnson House



The Country Life

In 1834 William Rotch, Jr. built this yellow mansion and coachman's house, surrounded by a full block of formal gardens. Fortunes made in the whaling trade enabled many prosperous merchants to move from New Bedford's commercial waterfront to live in the "country." Their grand homes lined County Street, reflecting the wealth and success the whaling merchants had gained.

Today the Rotch-Jones-Duff House is a lasting legacy of the great age of whaling. The house and gardens are open for touring year-round. Enter through the Madison Street entrance just ahead.

...nowhere in all America will you find more patrician-like houses; parks and gardens more opulent, than in New Bedford....One and all, they were harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea.

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

The Rotch, Jones, and Duff families made their fortunes in the whaling trade. Each family owned and occupied the house during the more than 150-year span that it served as a residence. The Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE) saved the building from redevelopment in the 1980s.



Rotch-Jones-Duff House, contemporary interior

The Rotch-Jones-Duff House

Photo Courtesy Rotch-Jones-Duff House
and Garden Museum